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Janna Stadvec  
Soc 599

## **The Effects of Sport Involvement and Coaching Styles on Self-Esteem, Self-Perception, and Mental Development on Adolescent Athletes**

This paper focuses on the relationship between sport involvement and effective and ineffective styles of coaching on the overall development of adolescent athletes. The self-esteem, self-perception, and mental development of adolescent athletes are both positively and negatively affected by their involvement and experiences on organized sports teams, and by the coaching they receive on those teams. Although sports have numerous benefits for children's overall development, I will focus on these three specific areas of development.

I will first develop a background of the concept of organized sports teams and then follow with two subjects; sport participation and involvement, and coaching styles. In each section, I will discuss how self-esteem, self-perception, and mental development of the child athlete are affected in relation to each specific topic.

### **Background**

Sports have been around for as long as most of us can remember, and have played an extremely important role in how our country spends its leisure time. Sports have provided us with social circles outside the daily grind and have also served as outlets for men and women from the stresses and responsibilities of everyday life. Youth sports have been considered a pivotal element in a child's social, emotional, and mental development.

Gaining popularity in the 1950s with programs such as Little League Baseball and Pop Warner Football, youth sport participants and supporters have increased dramatically over the years. Over 26 million children are involved in youth sport programs, and it is quite obvious that with such great numbers, these programs serve as prime building blocks in most of our nation's children's development (Hines and Groves 1989). Outside of school, sports teams are the second largest social setting children are involved in. And since they learn appropriate, and sometimes inappropriate, social behaviors in these settings, it is important to look deeper into how these social situations affect the individuals themselves. So, how and to what extent are our children being influenced and affected by these organized sport programs? Aside from teaching children team work, competitiveness, and athleticism, one must look at how just simply being involved in such programs effect the self-esteem, self-perception, and mental development of these children.

### **Sport Participation**

Sport participation and involvement can range from child to child depending on how serious they are about their sport. When children are young, in some cases, they might be forced by their parents to participate in a sport. Although there is nothing wrong with this, and parents are just trying to give their children the opportunity to expand their minds and abilities, this might affect how involved a child becomes in the sport. When children become serious in what they are doing, everything is magnified in regards to their athletic ability, how they see themselves, and how others see them. In a study done by McHale et al. (2005), they compared sport involved children with non-sport involved

children in the urban area of Worcester, MA and researched how being involved in after school programs (particularly organized sports) affected a child's delinquency and resulting self-esteem. Children recorded being less likely to become involved in drugs and have inappropriate social behaviors. They also recorded having higher levels of self-esteem, and because of that were more likely to be outgoing and aggressive in school activities such as gym class. This shows that being involved in sports during hours where kids would be free to do other, possibly deviant, things takes them off the streets and puts them in a constructive setting.

Another aspect of being involved in organized sports is the concept of "belongingness" (Daniels and Leaper 2006). In other words, peer acceptance plays a major role in the level of self-esteem a child will have. In this particular study done by Daniels and Leaper (2006), they compared boys and girls and how their sense of "belongingness" differs from each other. The researchers found that boys between the ages of 12 and 21 view being involved in sports very masculine. Since males in today's society value masculinity as what defines men, these boys are more accepted by their peers and as a result have a higher self-perception. Next, the researchers found that girls participating in youth sports and continuing on to extremely competitive sports is very common today. Decades ago, the sporting world was dominated by males, and as our society has changed, so has the idea of females in sports. However, this study has found that girls who accelerate in predominately male sports (football, hockey) might have a harder time being accepted by their peers. Overall, girls who participate in any type of sport are typically accepted by their peers and recorded a high level of self-esteem.

When doing research for this literature review, it was difficult to limit my findings to just youth (middle school and under) which is what I had hoped to do. But as my researched continued I realized that it was necessary to include high school athletes, since the height of self-esteem is either made, or broken, in those four years. In a study performed by Eccles et al. (2003), these researchers found many interesting results. High school athletes are more likely to participate in deviant behavior such as underage drinking than their non-athletic classmates, simply because their social circles are larger than their non-athletic classmates. Having larger social circles invites a variety of interests and activities that one may partake in and as a result, the chances of a person being exposed to things such as underage drinking increases. This was the only piece of negative information I found while doing this research in regards to being involved in sports teams. Countering this evidence, Eccles et al. (2003) found that athletes receive better grades in school and liked classes better. They were more likely to attend college and have a steady job by the age of 24 than those who were non-sports involved high schoolers.

Lastly, in regards to sport participation, both males and females were given the Self-Perception Profile for Adolescents, a survey that was used in a study by Todd and Kent (2003) to test their own thoughts on their social behavior and self-esteem. The results in this survey showed that males scored significantly higher on the athletic competence portion of the survey than females. Another finding was that female athletes showed to have a higher self-worth than male athletes. I am led to speculate that there is a possibility that males scored lower in this area because their male coaches are not afraid to be tough on them, whereas male coaches might be more lenient with their female

athletes. In regards to this thought, coaching styles and whether they are affective or not play a major role in how young athletes perform and view themselves as an asset to their team.

### **Coaching Styles**

Coaching plays an important role in the way a team is run. In this aspect, non familiar adults (teachers and coaches) provide athletes with resources and emotional/educational/occupational advice which non-athletes are less likely to receive (Eccles et al. 2003). In this study by Eccles et al (2003), the same study mentioned earlier in this review, the researchers found that student athletes viewed and valued this advice more than their non-athletic classmates. Their non-athletic classmates receive advice from within their social circles, rather than getting advice from outside of them. As a result, the availability of non-familiar adults in crucial times in a child's life (high school) is extremely beneficial. This leads me into the topic of not only coaching itself, but the different ways in which coaching can be effective in the formation of self-esteem, self-perception, and mental development in child athletes.

A coach's assessment of an athlete has an incredibly significant impact on their self-esteem and self-degradation. Also, how a coach views his players has an impact on the degree of leadership and popularity of a child within the team. Athletes with lower coach assessments have lower self-esteem and higher anxiety, and vise-versa (Hines and Grove 1989). In conjunction with the results of the Hines and Grove (1989) study, Smith and Smoll (1990) found that children with high self-esteem to begin with were not affected by poor coaching skills and assessment. Only low self-esteem children were affected by these things. Consequently, coaches with the highest level of positive

reinforcement, supportiveness, and instructiveness yielded the highest self-esteemed children. If coaches are trained before their seasons start in effective ways of coaching, the effects of positive and negative reinforcement, and different ways to implement those reinforcing actions then they will result in better athletes all around (Smoll et al. 1993). In this Smoll et al. study done in 1993, three years after their original study was done, they proved through observation and surveys that children were happier and had higher self-esteem when their coaches reinforced them in a positive way. The athletes, in this case boys little league teams between ages 8 – 12, recorded liking the game better, liking their coaches better, and having a better sense of what it means to be a “team” at the end of their season, compared to the control group of coaches who received no training.

In going beyond just coaches, athletic instructors, physical education teachers, and exercise instructors work in the same way. When these instructors involve children in the goal setting process, they feel like their opinion matters. Autonomy support, giving athletes enough room to look at a situation and perceive it their own way rather than forcing ideas upon them and encouraging them to make their own decisions, is crucial in coaching children (Edmunds, Ntoumanis, and Duda 2008). If coaches and instructors push their own values and ideas on their students/athletes then the children aren’t expanding their own thoughts and ideas. In the positive light of coaching, a quote from Edmunds, Ntoumanis and Duda (2008) sums everything up: “Interpersonal involvement refers to the quality of the relationship between those in a position of authority and the individuals they interact with, and represents the formers’ willingness to dedicate psychological resources, such as time, energy and affection” (376).

However, it is not right to only look at the positive side of coaching. In order to avoid any criticism, I must mention the negatives too. When success of an athlete gets too large, they might stop viewing themselves as an individual with many diverse attributes and abilities, and start looking at themselves as one identity, an athlete. This stems from an extreme desire to please their coaches, parents, fans, and themselves. They harbor extreme fear of disappointment, and respect for their coach, which often leads to extreme measures such as eating disorders or body-image distortion (Jones, Glimtmeier, and McKenzie 2005). The pressures from the coaches is more than the athlete can handle on their own so they turn to other extreme measures to remain in control. Body image and self-image are shaped by interactions with others around us. As a result, we attach ourselves greatly to what people think of our body and how they think we should look. The same goes for athletes. Coaches stress staying trim, toned, and thin for girls, and criticize boys when they aren't muscular enough. Coaches who interact with their athletes outside of the athletic environment have a greater advantage in teaching their athletes positive body-image and self-image values. They can use their experiences outside the athletic environment to positively reinforce their athletes inside the athletic environment (Edmunds, Ntoumanis, and Duda 2008).

## **Conclusion**

Sport participation and coaching styles are two major functions of self-esteem, self-perception, and mental development in regards to youth athletes. It is important for us as sociologists to study these areas of social interaction because it stands as one of the major building blocks in children's development. Positive reinforcement and other



techniques of coaching can improve children's outlook on other aspects of their lives. Self-esteem goes beyond the playing field. It carries over into every area of their life, forming who they become down the road. Being involved in sports is something that is very beneficial to young children. Even less athletic children learn how to be part of a team, how to interact with other children their own age, and how to respond to the coaches that teach them.

Further research is needed to obtain a clearer picture of how exactly coaching styles can be changed to benefit everyone, not just their team's record. I found that most studies focused on boys, and would like to see more research done on girls in sports leagues. I would like to see more research done on individualized sports, such as swimming, gymnastics, or dance (i.e. ballet) for both males and females to see if any of the evidence found can be related to those sports. Also, in regards to self-esteem, a lot of the studies generalized and only focused on self-esteem in the aspect of sports participation and coaching. I found very little research done on parenting pressures and pressures from other team members resulting in low self-esteem and self-perception. It is important that we focus our attention to groups such a sports because outside of school, organized teams create the majority of other social groups children are involved in. Parents should take the responsibility to make sure that their children will get a quality team and coaching experience. If those areas are lacking in their team, it could be extremely detrimental to their social and mental development. If an effort is made to improve the quality of coaches and encourage children to participate in organized sports teams, then their overall self-esteem, self-perception, and mental development will benefit from that.

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